Survey Data Collection Network (SDC-Net): The impact of Covid-19 on survey data collection methods in the social sciences

Final Report

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Introduction

[Survey Data Collection Network (SDC-Net)](#) was a network of UK-based academic and non-academic partners including government departments, third sector and commercial research organisations, academics and major ESRC investments to share knowledge and collaborate in the area of survey data collection in social surveys as well as in setting the research agenda in the field. The network operated between December 2021 and April 2023. The Principal Investigator was Olga Maslovskaya (University of Southampton) and the Co-Investigators are Gabriele Durrant (University of Southampton and NCRM), Lisa Calderwood (UCL), Gerry Nicolaas (NatCen) and Laura Wilson (ONS). The network activities were funded by the ESRC via the project "The impact of Covid-19 on survey data collection methods in the Social Sciences" as an additional funding stream of the ESRC-funded UK National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM). The network included 107 members. The list of the organisations of the network members can be found in Appendix 1. Tim Hanson, who is the Head of ESS Questionnaire Design and Fieldwork in the European Social Survey (ESS), Ben Humberstone, who is the Head of Population Studies in Kantar Public, Sam Clemens, who is the Head of Probability Survey in Ipsos-Mori as well as Debrah Harding, who is the Managing Director of the Market Research Society (MRS), were project partners.

The ESRC recognised the importance of the activities of the previous network [GenPopWeb2](#) which was also funded by the ESRC and the activities of SDC-Net were the continuation of the GenPopWeb2 with the wider scope addressing not only issues associated with online data collection in social surveys but the wider area of survey data collection in the UK.

Main aims

The main aims of SDC-Net were to bring together academic and non-academic partners who are involved in the design and implementation of data collection of large-scale ESRC and government social surveys in the UK to share knowledge and good practice and to identify the key research priority areas in the field of survey data collection. More specifically the main aim of SDC-Net was to provide a forum for discussion, facilitate knowledge exchange, consolidation of good practice and learning

around the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on survey data collection methods in the social sciences.

The network had the following objectives, to:

1. facilitate regular communication of lessons learned during the pandemic and discussions of ways forward, including the identification of key issues and current and future research areas around data collection methods following Covid-19 pandemic,
2. collate, review and consolidate already existing evidence and material produced by the various key stakeholders,
3. share knowledge and inform good practice for methods in longitudinal and cross-sectional studies following the pandemic, in particular collating experiences on how to return to and adjust in-person face-to-face interviews, on barriers to online data collection as well as what alternative modes of data collection are available, including innovative ones like video-interviewing, and their advantages and limitations,
4. share reports, guides, online resources and recommendations, where appropriate, via a dedicated website via NCRM,
5. bring together and foster collaboration between academics, social research funders, commissioners of surveys, research associations and survey practitioners.

SDC-Net activities

For the duration of the network, we have organised various events and activities: assessment of research priority areas in the field of survey data collection in the UK, six network events, qualitative data collection and analysis of barriers for transitioning to online data collection and of data collection innovations as well as meetings of the special interest group on video-interviewing among other activities. All relevant activities, documents and reports can be found on the SDC-Net website https://www.ncrm.ac.uk/research/SDC-Net/. Details about the main activities and events can be found below.

Assessment of research priority areas in survey data collection in the UK

We conducted an assessment of research priority areas in survey data collection field as requested by the ESRC. The wider network was consulted for their feedback and the final report (Durrant et al. 2022) was produced which can be [found on the NCRM website](#).

The following topics were identified as priority areas for research and are presented in the order of priority:

1. Future of face-to-face survey data collection
2. Investigating survey data quality
3. Innovations in survey data collection
4. Adjustment for mode effects
5. Improved sampling frames for general population surveys
6. Changing role of survey interviewers
7. Complex measurements in online surveys
8. Discontinuity/time series in repeat cross-sectional and longitudinal measurements
9. Development of an inclusive data system across the whole data lifecycle
10. Exploration of innovative methods to achieving this inclusive data system, including respondent centred design

This list represented the best expression of "community-owned objectives" that we had at that moment in time, and it informed the ESRC call for a Survey Data Collection Methods Collaboration (now called "[Survey Futures](#)").

Events

We organised and run [six network events](#). All events had an online format to ensure inclusivity. Slides for events are available (where appropriate) on the SDC-Net website. The events were approximately 2 hours long each, and focussed on topics identified by the survey data collection community:

1. First meeting of the Survey Data Collection Network – 8 December 2021
2. Innovations in Survey Data Collection – 2 February 2022
3. Survey Data Quality – Finding a New Normal? – 4 May 2022

4. Future of Face-to-face Data Collection – Developing and Implementing a Revised Face-to-face Strategy – 5 July 2022

5. Future Demand for Face-to-face Fieldwork: How shall the survey industry respond? – 10 October 2022

6. Decisions, Decisions, Decisions: Survey commissioning in a multi-source, multi-mode world – 22 March 2023

The remainder of this summary report will discuss each event and the key messages.

First Meeting of SDC-Net

The first meeting of the network took place on the 8th of December 2021 at which the main themes to be addressed by the activities of the network were identified. Figure 1 summarises the main themes identified by the network during the meeting.
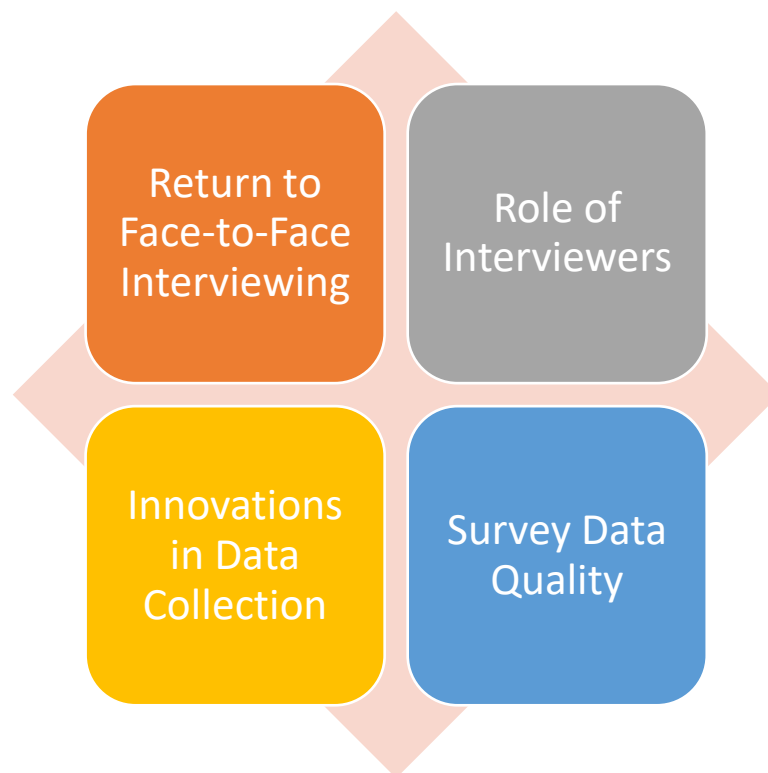

Figure 1: Themes to be addressed by the SDC-Net activities.

Second Event: Innovations in Survey Data Collection

The second event took place on the 2nd of February 2022 and was entitled **Innovations in Survey Data Collection**. The event covered three innovations that emerged during the pandemic: two presentations discussed the experience with video-interviewing in the European Social Survey (ESS) (Tim Hanson) and in 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS) and 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70) (Matt Brown), a third presentation was about an Electronic Questionnaire Device (EQD) (Professor Rory Fitzgerald) for those who are not computer-literate or do not have access to the internet, followed by a discussion about the knock-to-nudge approach (Dr Patten Smith).

Mixed views on video-interviewing were reported for the ESS by different national teams: some were extremely positive based on rate of interviews and experiences, whereas others said that there was little or no interest in this approach. Most countries that conducted a high number of video-interviews reported few technical issues. Respondents often liked the fact that video-interviews were being offered (during the pandemic) even if the option was not always taken up. More work is needed in the areas of the impact of video-interviewing on sample composition, interview experience and technical issues across all countries, and reasons for different success rates for video-interviews between countries. The Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS) reported that for some questions (gross pay, weight) item nonresponse was higher for video-interviews when compared to face-to-face interviews in the previous sweep, whereas for other questions (value of home, outstanding mortgage) the item nonresponse was substantially lower. CLS reported positive feedback from the participants of both surveys that they conduct (the NCDS and the BCS70). Breakoffs were very rare and almost all participants were willing to do video-interviews again. First results suggest that video-interviews show some promise in longitudinal studies, but more research is needed especially in the areas of impact of video-interviewing on measurement and data quality.

The Director of the ESS Professor Rory Fitzgerald reported the results of testing an Electronic Questionnaire Device (EQD), i.e. an electronic questionnaire on a tablet which can be used by respondents who are not computer literate and/or do not have internet access. Some respondents were initially reluctant to use the ESS EQD but

87% of respondents reported that they would do it again. The main refusals were due to the fear of the technology. Open questions were a bit problematic, and most respondents expressed preference for typing rather than recording. Overall, EQD demonstrated a clear potential to be used with parts of the offline population. It is important to carry out further testing of the EQD in a random probability survey, especially alongside a web survey. EQDs could be a very useful tool in a probability-based web panel for including offliners. Costs analysis should be conducted to understand the cost of use of the devices in a large-scale study.

Rather than having someone give a presentation on the knock-to-nudge approach, Dr Patten Smith chaired a discussion among network members. During the discussion the defining parameters of this new and innovative approach were identified: the interviewer makes contact with the sampled case (e.g., household), if required, the interviewer carries out respondent selection on the doorstep, the interviewer asks the selected respondent(s) to take part in a survey. However, the interviewer does not carry out the survey but asks the selected respondent(s) to complete the survey online or by phone. This approach emerged during the pandemic when social distancing rules were in place. Different variations of the approach were introduced and discussed: knock-to-web and knock-to-telephone. The importance of identifying the major continuous/repeat surveys that have used knock-to-nudge approach was highlighted as well as the need to compare the quality of data collection when knock-to-nudge was and was not used. It was stated that it is important to compare response rates, nonresponse bias and measurement error in the contexts when knock-to-nudge was implemented to identify the post-pandemic future of the approach.

Third Event: Survey Data Quality – Finding a New Normal?

The third event took place on the 4th of May 2022 and was entitled Survey Data Quality – Finding a New Normal? The event discussed survey data quality in the context of emerging from the pandemic. There were three speakers, first was Rachel Skentelbery who is Deputy Director of the Quality and Improvement Division at the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The second speaker was Mary Gregory who is Deputy Director and Head of Regulatory Services at the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR). The third to speak was Guy Goodwin who is the CEO of NatCen.

The first presenter started her presentation by sharing that the pandemic forced many of us to work differently, including the approach to survey research and design. There was a lot of pressure to deliver at pace and we have learned how to do so, but at what cost to quality? There are metrics available to us to monitor and understand quality, which is extremely important. However, understanding quality can be challenging and it is important to get to the core of the issues.

The first presenter suggested that to find an effective 'new normal' we need to understand the risks and limitations of what we are doing now but also it is important to think about the future. For example, what populations are we finding hard to measure, which question areas need proper testing, and will the proposed approaches address those root problems? Rachel said that in terms of pace, we also need to focus on continuous improvement. If we need to get something out quickly, what risks can we take for initial results to then improve later? Time series can be impacted if we work in this way so informed decisions needs to be taken with stakeholders. Time series are incredibly important for some outputs, whereas levels matter for others.

The first presenter summed up by saying that we are already working in a new way, but we need to refine how we do this. Robust statistical design and an informed view of risk and impact are important.

The second presenter focused on the quality and value of statistics, acknowledging that users want data more quickly than ever before. She questioned if surveys can still deliver in this new reality? There is a need is for surveys to be set up quicker, for data to be more granular and produced with greater accuracy, more detailed breakdowns are needed, as well as quicker publications and often increasingly complex questions need to be used. During the pandemic, users became accustomed to receiving those things which makes the task very big when thinking about how the new normal might look like.

Surveys have a future and play a very important role. Despite the mass of data available, they often remain the only way to answer very specific questions that can be really challenging to get to, especially around people's behaviours or understanding their rationale. However, there are limitations, which have been seen more clearly

during the pandemic, but they are not new. Surveys are expensive and response rates are hard to maintain.

During the pandemic with many surveys switching mode to online, understanding a mode effect versus genuine behaviour change has been challenging. The demand for collecting data at pace meant that parallel runs were not possible which reduced researcher's ability to understand the impact of these survey changes. When these changes are combined with the huge changes we have observed in society because of the pandemic, it becomes especially challenging.

It is for OSR to question whether quality and value can be maintained – and is there a place for surveys in the new normal? There is always going to be a need for surveys, but they will increasingly be playing a role within a broader landscape, for example, complementing administrative data sources. We should continue the collaborative cross-sector working that was impressive during the pandemic.

There is room for improvement on making sure that the communication of the uncertainty and changes is clear. There are a lot of technical aspects underpinning surveys and why things have happened in certain ways. However, it is important to create clarity in how survey providers or survey publishers make sure that the technicalities are understood in a way that the public can take on board and comprehend the limitations of use.

The second presenter concluded with saying that regulators need to adapt, as do those who are working on surveys. OSR's priorities are focused on data that answers the most important questions, thinking about promoting data sharing and data linkage, and being a thought leader around the use of data. The aim is not to solely focus on official statistics that they are regulating, but on how they can make sure that some of the principles that they care about are applied more broadly.

The CEO of NatCen Guy Goodwin focused on discussing the purpose of the survey, the mode, and the transition the industry is experiencing which may have been escalated through the pandemic. Also, the presenter discussed what we have learned during the pandemic, and issues around the definition and scope of a survey.

He described surveys as firstly trying to conduct social investigations and secondly as support to help meet needs for basic counts in the absence of registers. However, the presenter expressed concerns that as an industry we have become focused more on the latter which has led to the questions about the future of surveys. Instead, we should be focused more on how we can use surveys to best meet needs of social investigation as big data will not meet that need.

The CEO of NatCen suggested that the survey community should decide what the future survey offer is – e.g., what do they look like in 2030? Perhaps a framework or a suite of products should be made available that describe the survey offering, each with their methodological advantages and disadvantages explained for mixed-mode surveys, panels, trackers etc. The presenter claimed that we are in a transition from a basic old survey model of traditional survey "one size fits all" to a move to "many sizes" model. Each with different cost bases and can be used to meet a whole load of requirements. There is also a change in the role of the interviewer coming up over the next decade, with it being more multi-purpose and this needs further thought.

The presenter challenged the progress that has been made in surveys in the last 20 years to explore and address the long-standing issues associated with surveys and quality. He suggested that we need to shift to a new normal that is more centred around where respondents and society are today – such as respondent-centred design. The presenter urged for the key issues with sampling frames, mode effects, non-sampling errors and other issues to be tackled to allow surveys to get on the front foot. It is important to approach ministers and commissioners with a framework and a 5-to-10-year plan for addressing them. The CEO of NatCen encouraged us as a community to lead the way in saying how surveys will look in the next decade versus waiting to be told by others. A discussion is needed amongst academics, commissioners, and practitioners to ensure we see change in the next decade and avoid remaining in a state of limbo and repeated discussions. During the pandemic we fell back on surveys, but have we learned the lessons from that?

The presenter spoke with certainty that surveys will be around for the foreseeable future. Surveys must be fit for many purposes, but we ought to be careful that the scope does not become too wide. There is a spectrum of people from the traditionalists who wish to continue with face-to-face interviewing to the modernists who would like

to utilise more administrative and big data. More is needed to be done to address the longstanding main methodological challenges and about bias and mode effects in the data from the pandemic, e.g., there is a need to look across different departments.

The CEO of NatCen concluded suggesting that the network should focus on how we transition to a new state and what does the future survey offering look like for our customers, respondents, and commissioners. Evidence must lead the way, perhaps with a joint methods centre from across many organisations looking into how we transition to what we define as the new future state of surveys.

Fourth Event: Future of Face-to-Face Data Collection – Developing and Implementing a Revised Face-to-Face Strategy

The fourth event took place on the 5th of July 2022 and focused on **Future of Face-to-Face Data Collection – Developing and Implementing a Revised Face-to-Face Strategy**. The event had four presentations: the first presenter was Dr Alex Lambert who is a Director of Survey Operations at the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the second presenter was Debrah Harding who is Managing Director of the Market Research Society (MRS) and the third presentation was a joint presentation delivered by Sophie Ainsby who is a Director of Data Collection at NatCen, Maria Luther who is Field Director from Ipsos MORI and Michelle Lewis who is Head of UK Data and Operations in Kantar Public. The fourth presentation was delivered by Dr Catherine Bromley who was a Deputy Director of Data Strategy and Infrastructure of ESRC.

The first presenter discussed challenges to face-to-face data collection, including operational and strategic challenges. The three main priority areas for data collection were identified: reducing bias, reducing attrition, improving response. Adaptive survey design and responsive operation were discussed and the presenter suggested that face-to-face data collection should be to the preferred mode among specific sub-groups to reduce nonresponse bias. He mentioned that it is important to introduce changes to the employment, training and retention of the future pool of face-to-face interviewers: multi-grade system should be introduced, the staff should be receiving mentoring and career structure should become clearer to reflect changes in the survey data collection landscape.

The second presenter suggested that the situation with face-to-face data collection is fluid, pre-covid conditions are unlikely to return, some projects may never return fully to in-home interviewing, there will be more mixed-mode projects, circumstances are continually changing as new society norms evolve.

In joint presentation the colleagues mentioned that pandemic was a catalyst for change, they started using sequential mixed-mode approaches. It is important to retain flexibility in approaches and to ensure that lessons learnt during the pandemic are not lost. Collaboration between interviewers, agencies and clients is of crucial importance. It was also reported that they are still navigating the impact of pandemic, managing the effort and cost of maintaining a skilled face-to-face panel. There is a need to continue to deliver face-to-face data collection in an unpredictable world and new opportunities should be explored, innovations implemented to manage time and cost, and new tools applied to work with participants and interviewers.

Fifth Event: Future Demand for Face-to-Face Fieldwork: How shall the Survey Industry Respond?

The fifth event took place on the 10th of October 2022 and focused on **Future Demand for Face-to-Face Fieldwork: How shall the Survey Industry Respond?** There were three presentations at this event: Tina Thomas from the ONS delivered one of the presentations, a joint presentation was delivered by Sophie Ainsby from Kantar Public, Steve Woodland from NatCen and Maria Luther from Ipsos MORI and the third presentation was done by Dr Catherine Bromley from the ESRC.   The joint presentation reported that the role of an interviewer is changing. The move to mixed-mode data collection and push-to-web data collection results in samples that are issued to face-to-face interviewers being less clustered which means more travelling for interviewers. Face-to-face interviews are carried out among those respondents who have not responded by telephone and/or online and this requires additional effort and skills to covert those reluctant respondents. It is very important to acknowledge and pay for specialist face-to-face interviewing skills, it is also important to introduce enhanced pay and support packages to reduce churn.

Tina Thomas reported that they are merging three field communities (Face-to-Face, Telephone Operations and International Passenger Survey Interviewers) to operate

as one Field Community. It is important to make contracts more flexible that will meet the ever changing requirements and move them onto corporate systems and platforms that will negate the need for a heavily resourced support team. It is also important to refresh field technologies so that interviewers have the right tools for the job. It is crucial to have a competent helpline to help respondents with online completion of surveys. ONS is also planning to re-brand the Field Communities and exploit the ONS brand more so that the respondents know who is running the survey and why their help is so important.

Dr Catherine Bromley reported that the evidence demonstrates an ongoing need for interviewers to play an active part in recruiting new samples, contacting more reluctant participants, and collecting complex and sensitive data. It is important to understand the benefits of moving data collection online and the risks of reducing the role of interviewers.

Sixth Event: Decisions, Decisions, Decisions: Survey Commissioning in a Multi-Source, Multi-Mode World

The final event took place in March 2023 and was entitled **Decisions, Decisions, Decisions: Survey Commissioning in a Multi-Source, Multi-Mode World**. Survey commissioners need to consider various trade-offs with regards to cost, accuracy, timeliness, inclusivity, granularity, etc. when deciding on the design of a survey, but also the use of "new" technologies and alternative data sources alongside or instead of surveys. It was also important to explore what information survey commissioners need from suppliers, research and methodologies to be able to make informed decisions about the commissioning and design of surveys. To explore all these, a panel discussion was organised, chaired by Gerry Nicolaas, Director of Methods at the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen). The panel members included Mike Daly from the Department for Work and Pensions, Michael Dale from the Department for Education, Ally McAlpine from Scottish Government, Martina Portanti from the Office for National Statistics and Andrew Spiers from Sport England.

Although administrative records, transaction data and other data sources may be relatively cheap and can provide very large datasets, surveys remain an important and necessary tool for collecting data for government commissioners of surveys. Surveys

can provide rich data that are not captured in administrative records, transaction data, smart data and other data sources. Furthermore, the benefits of non-survey data are often overstated with insufficient attention given to issues related to access, representativeness, and accuracy of measurement. Surveys can be designed to provide rich data that are not captured in other data sources. However, surveys can be prohibitively expensive when collecting data for small area estimates, data on small population groups, and the inclusion of hard-to-survey groups. Linking survey data to administrative records and other data sources has the potential of capitalising on the strengths of each data source while compensating for their weaknesses.

During the pandemic, many large government-funded surveys switched from face-to-face interviewing to other data collection modes, including telephone and web. Although this experience seems to have increased the willingness among survey commissioners to consider other modes post pandemic, it has also demonstrated the benefits of face-to-face interviewing: e.g., persuading reluctant respondents to take part, the ability to administer existing questionnaires which tend to be long, and to collect complex information. For these reasons, commissioners of government surveys still consider face-to-face to interviewing to be an important and essential data collection mode for surveys that require a high level of accuracy. Choice of mode(s) will depend on how the data will be used and various trade-offs between accuracy and cost.

The use of 'new' technologies (e.g., smart meters, video-interviewing, mobile phone data) has the potential to reduce respondent burden and improve measurement. However, the existence of 'new' technologies does not mean that members of the public are ready and willing to use these 'new' technologies. Furthermore, these methods have their own error properties and may not necessarily provide better quality data. This will change over time: for example, the use of QR codes to provide respondents with access to web questionnaires was not successful pre-pandemic but this has changed since the widespread use of QR codes during the pandemic and appears to have a positive impact on response rates. Survey commissioners are looking to suppliers to provide evidence on the usefulness of 'new' technologies. In the meantime, 'new' technologies will complement rather than replace traditional survey methods.

There is growing awareness among survey commissioners to consider the carbon footprint of surveys and how this can be reduced. However, this is not straightforward and attempts to reduce the carbon footprint can have unintended consequences. The measurement of carbon footprints and the trade-offs are not well understood. The value of collecting high quality data may be more important than the relatively small reduction in carbon emissions.

The panel discussion ended with each panel member stating the main thing that survey suppliers could provide to help them make better informed decisions about survey design. All five panel members agreed that collaboration between commissioners, suppliers, and academics was essential. Examples included a more collaborative approach to the commissioning process, less fixed/detailed specification of survey tenders, more time for development and testing of survey methods, knowledge sharing across surveys.

Later in 2023 the [Survey Futures](#) project – Survey Data Collection Methods Collaboration – was funded by the ESRC for 3 years (July 2023-June 2026). This whole community collaboration brings together colleagues from academic institutions as well as four major survey practice organisations in the UK (ONS, NatCen, Ipsos and Kantar Public).

Appendix 1

Affiliations of members

	Organisation
1	University of Southampton
2	National Centre for Social Research (NatCen)
3	Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS), University College London (UCL)
4	Office for National Statistics (ONS)
5	European Social Survey (ESS), City University
6	Kantar Public
7	Ipsos Mori
8	Market Research Society
9	Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)
10	National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal), UCL
11	Understanding Society, University of Essex
12	Sociological Research Association (SRA)
13	Local Government Association
14	Government Statistical Service (GSS)
15	Scottish Government
16	Welsh Government

17	Department for Education (DfE)
18	Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
19	Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS)
20	Department for Work and Pension (DWP)
21	Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS)
22	NHS Digital
23	Sports England
24	University of Michigan
25	Australian National University, Social Research Centre
26	Independent company /think tank